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ABSTRACT

This speech is about respect for small things and suggests that schooling could benefit from the care and attention enabled by a smaller scale. Among the points made are that, yes, all children can learn, but that is no big deal. Schooling should contribute to their education, but schooling is far from being identical with education. Learning requires sharing, but in a society organized to restrict sharing quite stringently, the practices of schooling are likely to cultivate miseducation and, in fact, have been structured to do so. Whatever the case with social and economic structures, however, parents and communities enjoy a greater interest and stake in the education of their children than anyone else and will defend those interests ferociously. Educators can help them instead of putting barriers in their way. All too often, the most challenged part of the population is given the fewest educational resources. Studies in seven states show that increased size of schools and districts decreased achievement in impoverished communities but increased achievement in affluent communities. Thus, school consolidation conveniently benefits the children of the most powerful groups. As a related point, society's emphasis on economics has led to a lack of adults and adult attention in children's lives. Lack of care and attention is also related to anti-intellectualism--an emphasis on "what works" faster and cheaper rather than on the slow cultivation of intellect. (Contains 23 references.) (SV)

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If It Ain't Big, Don't Break It

Craig Howley
Ohio University

Keynote Address at the Fall Forum of the College of Human Resources & Education
West Virginia University

Morgantown
November 5, 1999

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If It Ain't Big, Don't Break It

This speech is about respect for small things.

The older I get, the more convinced I become that the secret of life resides in things small enough to escape the notice of giant institutions. Miraculously, this oversight by the high and the mighty enables care and attention among the rest of us. And care and attention are essential for education. Schooling could benefit from care and attention. It could benefit, in short, from a smaller scale. That is, if we think that schooling needs to have something to do with education.

All this being hypothetically the case, I'm going to interpret three points that relate in a very complex way to the injunction not to bust up small things. The way forward will not, however, be straight or narrow. But I'm going to have rather a lot to say about **what works** at the end, so please stay tuned.

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First, Alan DeYoung used to ask a real trenchant question, which I bet he picked up from some dubiously schooled hillbilly.

This was the question: "Whose kids *are* these ***anyhow***?"

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What impertinence! Send them hillbillies to *back to school*, buddy, right now. We'll beat that stuff out of 'em with *manipulatives*, by God!

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Whose kids are these, anyhow? That "anyhow" indicates a rhetorical question.

Rhetorical questions are the *worst* kind of impertinence, especially if you're putting one to

a certifiable *professional*. The professional's attitude is this: "Hey, honey, don't waste my time unless you're willing to put yourself in my hands." Yeah, it's the "all-state model." I should know, I'm certifiable, terminally credentiated and all that junk. I can, like many of you, do real damage. It comes with the turf.

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Maybe you can begin see where I'm going with this stuff? "All-State? Yes? Really Big? Like maybe in "The School Building Authority"?

You and me--we're complicit. Our complicity gives us power, however. We can say "no." We can say "yes" but act out "no." Apparently Richard Elmore has a polite paradigm for this bottom-up approach to top-down school reform. When you say yes and mean no, that's "interactive implementation."

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Second: I'm a parent! We have three kids. They're all grown up now, but they are in fact most of the reason I continue to have much to do with schooling. It's a natural and logical connection, see, not an artificial or professional one.

Not only am I not in doubt about whose kids they are, I'm not in doubt about whose grandkids live with them. They're mine, *all mine!*

Get the picture? Parents need to be ferocious in defense of their kids. Anybody else is *not likely* to give much of a damn. The bureaucratic State itself, and I mean government in general, the capital-S "state," is abundantly and commonly careless. That's what bureaucracy was created for, to avoid caring too much. It really works!

As rich and booming as we supposedly are right now in the US, we can't even guarantee

each kid will have access to decent *health* care. We've put big business in charge of health care, so great is our distrust of the capital-S State. On second thought, maybe we've been manipulated into thinking we put business in charge. Maybe, in fact, they put themselves in charge. You figure it out.

The next step down from our *not caring* about kids' health would be their suicide and murder. As they themselves might say: "**Duh**."

Caring properly for their *minds*, however, would be a lot more difficult than we-whose-business-it-is-to-care-in- that-way *even imagine*. What? I'm saying that we're almost *clueless* even after 100 years of hopeful science aimed at teaching, learning, and--"hear our prayers O Lord"--administering in schools. We're all guilty.

I'm not the only one to say this. James Agee says so very eloquently and surprisingly in his classic about poor families in the rural South, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. If you read him, maybe you'll leave Agee feeling he's the stupid one, but you ought still to get that old Jonathan-Edwards sense that you're a loathsome spider suspended on a thread held by an angry God over a fiery abyss. Yeah, buddy.

We do scary work. It really is enough to make many people develop thick skin, put on blinders, and dive for cover. Who do you think we blame when this fate overtakes us? Right. Kids. Parents. Whole communities of 'em. We're both victims, though--us and them, so we may as well go on to blame ourselves. Mostly we do. Many of us feel real bad.

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Third, you think accountability is the bottom line? Baloney. Parents are the bottom line, communities are the bottom line.

Isn't it strange that I'm not saying that kids are the bottom line?

No, it's consistent. Parents are sure to defend kids as the bottom line, if the way business is done mess up the possibility for them. Maybe achievement is the bottom line in the business model, but maybe greed is the bottom line. With education, though, there isn't any bottom line. The end of education is death, people. Get used to it. Education is tragic. Ask Socrates.

Not that student achievement isn't crucial. Hobart Harmon and I just finished editing a special edition of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* on the achievement of rural students, because we think it *is* crucial. You can't understand yourself or your circumstances very readily without reading. And if you're going to put yourself in the way of reading widely and deeply, as you should because reading is the most useful tool with which to educate yourself, you ought to understand mathematics and not just arithmetic because mathematics elevates opinion to the level of informed judgment. And if you want to make the world a better place, you should start writing about what you think and what you learn as your education continues. If you ask me, the 3Rs are the core of good schooling, just like The People claim.

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There's lots else you can do to make the world a better place--lobby, play politics, rabble-rouse, go after grants, go to meetings, refuse to go to meetings, just say no, just say "yes, but" or "yes, and"--whatever seems useful at the time. My point is that the tools of thought are useful in changing the world for the better. Without them, you will be a less useful person to your community.

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But chanting the phrase "Rural Children Can Learn At High Levels"--a slightly modified

contribution from another place that's almost heaven--says nothing useful and nothing very thoughtful. Sure, they can. *But if only if* (do you remember what that means from high-school geometry?) there were a healthy rural-sector economy, *if and only if* our brothers and sisters who face the greatest life threats weren't accorded the fewest resources to meet them, *if and only if* parents were continuously accessible to their own children, *if and only if* there were plenty of well-meaning adults around all children a lot of the time, and *if and only if* the world they all inhabited together jointly cared for the well being of their minds.

All those "if and only ifs" might be the beginning of an educationally relevant definition of community, in fact. You might object that, on the basis of such a definition, rural communities might be in more trouble than rural schools. Interestingly, *consolidation* was supposed to solve that problem. Check it out. That's what Ellwood Cubberley and the Country Life movement imagined.

Now, chanting a hopeful phrase is harmful if it means, as it seems to mean in almost-heaven after almost-heaven, that society is justified in holding the institution of schooling accountable for these social shortcomings.

These are not excuses, you understand, that we professional educators should use to protect us from hard work. Sure, go ahead, expect kids to think; go all the way and understand that they all *do* think, and they think a lot and *all the time already*.

It's not stupidity that keeps us from this recognition. It's the way we do business--and I'm talking *political economy*, here--that's in large measure responsible for our failure to expect very much from poor kids. We gotta keep the rabble back in the rubble, otherwise they could take our jobs!

End of story, all us hicks know this. The school board has all the good jobs. We--which is to say the way the political economy does our business for us--have willfully created and we willfully sustain the conditions that impose poverty on so many people. It seems, moreover, that we spend a great deal of time *celebrating* these conditions as the one-best way for the whole world. We're actively disseminating this model worldwide. It makes me sick to know this, and I'd like it to sicken more people, too.

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Well, OK, now we're worming our way into this problem. Let's take a look at these "ifs"--healthy rural sector economy, distributive justice, accessibility to parents, more adults around kids, and anti-intellectualism. These are the topics that will get us where we're going. These five ifs will take up the rest of this afternoon's scheduled entertainment.

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First, the notion of a healthy rural sector economy. You know very well which of our people have a healthy rural-sector economy. That would be the Amish notably among others. Their economy is local and based on a vision of earth and heaven, family and community, productivity, and hard work. Not everyone thrives in it, of course, but remarkably, just 20% of their rising generation opts out of the culture.

Don't, please don't, tell me "*we can't all live that way.*" Of course we can't. We don't all live like each other in the first place. Or, maybe we already live *too much* like each other. We don't think about alternatives and we're getting rid of alternatives as fast as our technology and expertise can carry us.

Don't tell me that the Amish are quaint and backward, either.

The Amish are not quaint or backward, which you would know if you'd ever seen one of them pull up to an ATM in a buggy. They hire out for factory work as well as own farms, and they do not insulate themselves from the world. Lots of Amish depend for transportation on their "Englisch" neighbors.

Want to buy Amish livestock? It won't be cheap, as my neighbor discovered when he went to an Amish hog sale--even now, with hog production in crisis mode in the mainstream economy.

The best deal I ever made in selling livestock was the sale of a cow to an Amish farmer. And the interaction was neither pleasant nor easy. So far as I can judge, the Amish value animals, which drives prices up, but they know what they're after, which drives prices down. We, on the other hand, neither value animals nor know what we're after. This observation, of course, applies to much more than livestock.

From the perspective of one concerned about the upbringing of children and families with children, the most surprising thing about Amish farmsteads is all the equipment for kids to play with on the lawns. You can hardly pass an Amish house that doesn't show respect for kids loud and clear. They have trampolines, fancy wooden gym sets, and all sorts of playthings. For me that equipment is a symptom of overall right educative purpose.

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How well you think they'd do on the NAEP or the international assessments? We'll never know. They don't care a bit. They're pacifists so I don't suppose the 21st century project of pressing American global economic dominion down the throat of the developing world is a real option for them. See? They have a very different view of educational purpose and schooling.

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It's possible.

All I'm saying is that a healthy rural-sector economy is not only ***not impossible***, it already exists in at least one solid exception to the rule. There are other exceptions. Anybody who wants to read up on this stuff is invited to send me an email message and I'll send back some suggested readings. Honest. I used to do it for a living. You can reach me at howleye*@*ael.org.

Second, let's consider the life-threats faced by our brothers and sisters; or, "distributive justice". This topic really addresses two ideas, and explaining the relationship of each, separately and jointly, to the institution of schooling will actually take up most of the rest of our time. It's the centerpiece of this talk. This is the ground where my own practical experience, research interests, and my ongoing interpretive project *converge*.

Wha? Let me explain.

My practical experience of schooling entails the following: teaching in a state hospital school for 40 long months in Roane County--even the building is gone now; teaching in three schools during a year as a substitute teacher in Jackson County. One of those schools, my favorite, closed long ago. I don't believe, by the way, that the fact it *was* my favorite and the fact that it *closed* are unrelated. That is, I liked it because it served purposes our profession willfully refuses to respect. Then I spent three years in math and education classrooms at the University of Charleston, where I learned that so many *good and smart kids* who sit through and pass college-prep math in high school emerge clueless about the whole mathematical enterprise. They didn't get the big picture.

Turning that sad outcome around for many of them-- and I am absolutely earnest in this-- was the biggest kick I've gotten from teaching so far.

Since then I've taught an occasional professional education class, most recently to doc students in Ohio University's rural education doctoral program. We want to cultivate care and attention for rural places and we tell students that it's a good thing to stay close to home. Studer ts tell **us** they've never heard this stuff before from professors and they say it's about time they **did**.

That's not the end of my practical experience, however, because since 1986 I've worked for an interesting organization that is neither fowl nor fish, neither practice per se nor research per se. This strange combination has everyone confused, the Feds, the SEAs, the LEAs, the IHEs, and the people who work there--that is, at AEL in Charleston--not the least. One of my colleagues, when asked what sort of work he does, wryly says that he sells insurance.

In many ways, confusion is productive. Not many people appreciate this fact, but I do, and so working for AEL has, on the whole, been a very happy experience for me. Confusion is the normal human condition, and, with the tools of thought can be a productive experience.

The myopia and solipsism of higher education really disgust me, I'm sorry to say. On the other hand, the anti-intellectualism of lower education, though I find it less offensive, troubles me just as much, in other ways.

But I'm anticipating our last topic too early. Let me continue toward the meeting of research, practice, and interpretation in the realm of distributive justice and the conditions of schooling, the second of the five "ifs" related to the strange chant from Kentucky. That's what I'm up to just now, in case you've lost the thread.

What did I learn from all that practical work, most of it *strange* practical work, strange at least from the perspectives of the study and practice of schooling both higher and lower? I

learned three things.

I say I learned them merely because reflection leads me to these things as conclusions. I can't prove any of this.

First, education is very different from schooling. John Goodlad agrees with me on this, as do practically all the philosophers who ever lived, practically all the thoughtful conservatives, and many radical leftists and rightists as well.

Second, structure matters. The agreement here is less widespread, especially among educationists. The insight has to do with observing what goes on in organizations that are, well, differently organized, which is to say, differently structured. Overall, but in a complex way, I conclude that smaller is better. I will say a lot more about this when I get to research, which is, I guess the presumed kernel of truth in this poor speech.

Third, learning and teaching (a joint act) is about *sharing* what you know and think (that is, as both student and teacher: a teacher of students, a student of students, and, most surely, a student of your own former teachers, and most particularly a potential student of any one whose work you read). This relationship of teaching and learning should not be the trap it most often seems to be, however. What I mean by "trap" is all the disconnections between teaching and learning and between personalities and roles, between power and authority.

You'd think such an insight about the importance of "sharing" would be self-evident, and perhaps it is, but my experience with the practice of schooling, and also the practice of research, not to mention interpretation, suggests to me this self-evident proposition is not very widely actualized.

What do I mean? Are you thoroughly confused yet?

Here's an example. Bob Moses calls elementary algebra the gatekeeper course. It's a brilliant insight, and the best evidence for our failure to share what we know. That's the sort of thing I m talking about.

The way we use knowledge not in the name of an ethos of propagating it, but of unfairly reserving it only for some people, and actively denying it to others. Don't you think schooling does this rather systematically? It's almost like we can't help it. As teachers, if we're not propagating knowledge, we're propagating ignorance. Most of us do some of both. The trick is to maximize the former and minimize the latter. This takes time and courage. But you also have to have something to share to begin with. Are 22-year-olds usually up to this? It seems so doubtful.

In fact, however, getting back to the algebra example, many of us don't know much algebra ourselves, even if we have passed through the gate. Which leads so many people to question whether algebra is good for anything.

Bad way to go. We can get rid of all sorts of cultural practices, high and low, worldwide, on that basis. Do you follow? Ignorance (as ignorance of algebra, in this case) causes us to dump stuff from the curriculum as well as from our lives.

Now, in case you need it, let me remind you that sharing is the essence of distributive justice. In fact, in too many places--I'd say far and away *most* places--the practice of schooling helps the way we do business, and I do mean the political economy, discard the most meaningful part of the world.

See? We deny knowledge to some--we say these kids are too poor, too dumb, or just kids. They won't get it and they can't have it.

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We end by hurting ourselves, by hurting the knowledge we supposedly "have" but can't in fact "have" except by sharing it. The bad effects don't stop there. In the end, a whole raft of cultural practices are discarded for exactly the reason that so few people now hold them *in common*.

Something else: this holding of something in common is what community is all about. When, as we have begun to do, we start talking, left and right, about the demise of community, you know this process has cut deep. Can the US thrive as a democratic nation, when it is populated by myopic experts whose economic well-being **actually depends upon intellectual myopia**?

See? It doesn't look good.

Hardly anyone in the US is saying this right now. Sure, yes, indeed: some academic are. Christopher Lasch, the great sociologist, did. Read him. Also, some of the people who write about rural things are saying this, but, of course, hardly anyone believes us, especially in the field of education.

We're small. They're big. They call us "romantics" to our faces and "bumpkins" to our backsides. They think we want to turn back progress. No, we're after not just a "viable" rural future, but a *decently rural* rural future.

Raymond Williams, who is somebody else you should read, says this is key. Rural is always represented as the *past* of society. We *must* be asserting a legitimately *rural* view of the *rural* future, says Williams. He also says there never was a golden age of rural virtue, so trying to reclaim such a thing is **profoundly** counterproductive.

The Amish example, of course, confuses us Englisch- Americans because the clothes and

horses and off-the-grid approach to power are practically incomprehensible to those who have been massively de-skilled. De-skilling is just "expert" spelled backwards. The Amish are not, my friends, going backward. They are going forward in their own considered way and probably with considerably more skill than the rest of us.

Question: What's more useless than algebra? Answer: poetry. Wendell Berry has a great passage in, I think, his book about rural Kentucky racism, *The Hidden Wound*.

His view of poetry is probably unique among people with doctorates in English. He attributes our problem with poetry to our mistaken belief that poems have no purpose other than a technically aesthetic one. He says that we no longer regard fiction as teaching us something. Literature is merely an adornment for the rich, instead of a text that opens up a realm of moral insight and action. He said that 30 years ago.

Nope: algebra and poetry are among the most useful things we can know. Try explaining that to a rural 14-year old kid or the kids' parents. Seems like difficult work? Is there some other kind of work worth doing? It takes a lifetime and I'm not going to tell you how it might be done. But you've got to relate it to the rural world. And there's lots more useful stuff that we mistakenly suppose to be useless, as well: how to build, grow, repair, invent, be with one another, practice forgiveness, and on and on. Schools can, of course, do only some of these things well. But they could--well, theoretically--stop doing some things.

What would that stuff be: stop closing schools; stop building big schools; stop counting infractions in the name of "discipline"; stop ignoring parents; stop listening to state and national organizations so much; stop blaming parents; stop blaming each other; find something you like to teach and teach it well; stop being such control freaks; stop disrespecting kids. It's an attitude

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thing. Maybe it's even a spiritual thing. The world is a lovely place. Help others realize it as such and I mean in reality as well as in the mind.

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Whoa!

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We're deep into it now. Let me review where we are:

All children can learn, big deal. Schooling should contribute their and our education, though schooling is far from being identical with education.

Incidentally, school people who want schooling to be identical with education or who mistake schooling for education are guilty of "hubris," the sin of pride. They had better watch out who they sleep with. At least that's what Sophocles might say to them.

Learning requires sharing, but in a society organized to restrict sharing quite stringently--that is, arguably the most stringently among all developed nations--the practices of schooling, like those of so much else, are likely to cultivate ***miseducation*** far too often. This happens, I believe, on purpose and ***not through accident, laziness, or ignorance***. It's structured that way.

Whatever the case with social and economic structures, however, parents and communities enjoy a greater interest and stake in the education of their children than anyone else. They will defend those interests ferociously. We can help them instead of putting barriers in their way.

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OK. Those are the lessons of practice, at least they are the lessons I draw from such practice as I have been privileged to be part of. Now for the privilege of doing the funny activity

we call "research" and for its ***interpretation***, which I think is where the practical value of research comes in.

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I'm inclined to think that making schooling a better experience has to do with making it a better experience for the kids of our brothers and sisters who face increased life threats with resources that don't exactly doom them to failure, but do come pretty damn close. Is it the middle- and upper-middle-class kids who are causing the US to look bad in international studies? Not really.

Frankly, I don't care if the US looks bad in international studies. It looks bad in health care, after all. Education is a lot more difficult, like I said. Logic says the output of schooling **would** look bad.

I don't, please notice, say "we look bad." I'm not identifying with the vanity and hubris of being best in the world. It's a waste of money the equal of going to the moon, which is why those who'd scream bloody murder loudest--if they heard my words--do in fact use the analogy of the space race. One must rattle the saber and drape oneself in the flag, naturally enough, to whip up support for being the biggest bully on the block.

No: I'm arguing *against* any form of one-best-way. The great fanfare accorded to the TIMSS study, while the study has some interesting findings certainly, serves all the wrong, **big** purposes. And I have the greatest respect for Torsten Husen, who originated international studies of achievement back in the 60s. Husen knows that smaller schools are generally better schools. I can give you chapter and verse.

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As far as this **peculiar game** of giving the most challenged part of the population the fewest resources to meet the challenge and then fixing it up by getting teachers and administrators to chant "Carry Me Back to Old Kentucky," well, here are some world-class statistics for you:

The richest 20 percent of Americans enjoy incomes that are 13 times higher than those in the poorest 20 percent of the population.

In Japan, the ratio is not 13 to 1, but ***4 to 1***.

In South Korea, it's ***6 to 1***.

In Germany, too, it's ***6 to 1***.

Incidentally, the US ratio is equivalent to the ratio in Malaysia (you know, it includes East Timor, and it's the nation where the president was finally removed from power for his personal contribution to distorting the income disparity of rich and poor). Let me add that both India and China are like Japan, South Korea, and Germany. Maybe their futures are brighter than ours, despite the challenge of population growth that they face.

More equitable distribution of resources, better international school performance. I doubt it's a perfect equation, but it would stand to reason that there was some degree of overlap. Especially if you think schooling has to do with sharing.

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What does the structure of schooling have to do with any of this? Plenty, as it turns out.

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This is suppressed information this close to heaven, however, so listen up. Small size benefits achievement in school organizations--districts as well as schools--that serve

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impoverished communities.

This should sound appropriate for West Virginia. And for Montana, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, California, and Alaska. I mention those states because that is where studies address the issue. The findings are pretty consistent.

What do I mean? **In impoverished communities**, as size gets **larger and larger**, achievement gets lower and lower, all else equal. And I'm talking both school and district size. It works the other way around in affluent commnities...the larger the size, the higher the achievement.

Get it? We call this an "interaction effect."

Now consider, on this basis who is most likely to benefit from the consolidation of districts and the closing of small schools to create bigger ones? Right, richer communities. Who's most likely to get hurt? You got it, poorer communities.

I think those communities have known this for years. "When we lost the school, we lost our community" they always say. **Always**.

Consolidation is so convenient because it benefits the children of the very groups that wield power most effectively and most efficiently. But this is a nation that is not supposed to believe in economic determinism. Well, maybe economic determinism is OK for the poor. What d'ya think?

Where do professional educators line up most often in this struggle? This is not difficult to answer. Superintendents generally lead the way with consolidation; they have for over 100 years. Not all supers, of course: there are always mavericks who insist they know better than the dictates of professional norms. And most supers claim they have no choice. Decrepit buildings,

voter failure to approve levies, regulations, staffing problems, no place to turn for capital funds, et cete·a, et cetera, ad nauseam.

I've been advising a community group in another state. They are opposing construction of a 3-6 elementary school with a capacity of 2,000 kids. This is in what we call (quote) "an adjace·t rural area." (unquote) which means it is historically rural but has begun, alas, to suburbanize. It's stuff like this, incidentally, that causes a lot of us to look very skeptically at the plans that pass for "rural economic development." Most rural economic development is urban economic development.

Anyhow, this was the best the administration could do--2000 kids in one building with one pr ncipal, and, sure, "house plans," for grades 3-6. I sent the group an article I did for *School Administrator*, which discussed upper limits of school size. I also sent them an email message that recapped the article and concluded this way:

> Now, I've always been shocked when I hear that rural distircts (of all places) propose to build elementary schools housing a thousand kids. I've seen it before, but rarely. We're talking about youngsters, right?
>
> In my book **a factory** employing a thousand adults is a big operation. The proposal confronting [your district] doubles the size and the shock, but I think it's not a K-8 school, but one for just grades 3-6, right? Sure, I don't know all the details at [your district], but my view with my own kids is that we might as well not send them to school if they have to attend schools as large as meat-packing plants.

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There was furor at the board meeting where the community people read my email message. I'd given them virtual carte-blanche to use it publicly. It appeared later in local op-ed columns and in paid advertisements.

The superintendent called me--yeah, personally--the next morning, in agony, mind you; he said he hadn't slept a wink; two years of planning went up in smoke; and his principals were frenzied. There was a board election coming up. The crowd, he said, had latched onto the phrase "meat-packing plants" and he was deeply offended and wanted me to know it. I think he believed the debacle was mostly my fault!

I tell you this so you'll understand I'm not kidding about this stuff. This man and I talked for an hour. Once it became obvious that I wasn't sensitive to the charge of violating professional norms, or to the charge of having been duped by the devil, my caller maintained that economic determinism gave him no choice in proposing so massive an elementary school. For my part, I maintained that since people in my position mostly advised people in his position, I was very happy to advise community groups. In his mind I remained an interloper who had no business messing around with his district. Some of you probably agree.

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But wait, others of you will say, don't we know better now? Doesn't *everybody* know small is better?

"Weren't you listening?" is what I say.

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Small is **not** better for *everybody*. Just for impoverished communities. The supposed

right s ze for a school or district *depends* on the circumstance. One size won't fit all, and that includes **small size**. In that out-of-state district, sure, size went through the roof and out of contro . Small**ER** is better in general only because we've taken big beyond the pale of common sense. Within the limits of common sense variability is, well, just common sense.

The whole business with size is similar to what Lee Cronbach once called an "aptitude treatment interaction." He had the insight, this was in the 1970s, that some instructional methods might just yield better results among some groups of students than others.

It's clever but not really subtle. The finding--and Cronbach did find that he was right--does p se very sharp economic dilemmas for publishers, however. If they were listening, which mostly they aren't. Can't afford to listen.

Why? the purveyors of school supplies want to sell everyone the same package. The claim is that "It's the silver bullet for every kid's head." However, in all likelihood, it's just a paintball for some kids. For others it could have the intended lethal effect, and for others a silver bullet between the eyes could do unexpected good.

Um....I think I've reversed the directionality here, a common problem with a slightly LD person, but you get the idea.

These wonderful innovations brought so vigorously to the marketplace are not going to "work" equally well for everyone. No way, Billy Bob.

This insight shoots to hell the whole idea of what works. ***Simply put, nothing works. Which is best: phonics or whole language? Don't ask, don't tell. Wrong question.***

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I hope that helps. Our findings for Georgia, Ohio, Montana, and Texas, by the way, are

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available from the Rural School and Community Trust's Policy Program, which supported Bob Bickel, from Marshall University, and me to do the studies based on my WVU dissertation research, which was, in turn based on a 1988 California study by Noah Friedkin and Juan Necoechea. Rich Hartnett was my chair here, if you want to know. I'm grateful for his help. He thinks he didn't do enough, but Rich asked the one critical question that determined the course of the study. "Is this," he asked, "a generic story or a West Virginia story?" As a result, among this series of studies, the dissertation is the only one to unpack the issues that have allowed the capital-S State via the SBA to have its way with local communities.

Bob Bickel, on the other hand, thinks we've now discovered a variable--call it 'socially evanescent size' if you like--that joins the pantheon of universally significant influences on student achievement; that is, SES, race, and, in some cases, gender. Now, he says, we have a fourth: the way size works via SES. Eureka. I'm not excited. I'm depressed.

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Notice, however, that we've included *school districts* in this discussion of size. School district size. Almost nobody cares about it. However, in Texas and Montana we didn't confirm the hypothesis for district size. Whoops.

How come? Lots of small districts and lots of small schools, too. Sometimes there wasn't much difference between districts and schools. This is especially the case in Montana. The lesson from Montana, especially, is that if you want to reduce the influence of both SES and that new star among variables, "socially evanescent size," keep the scale of your whole enterprise small. Please note, as well, that Montana turns in stellar state-level NAEP scores, even with a population of about 12% American Indian students. Unlike urban African Americans, the

Indians in Montana attend small schools in small districts. How come? Maybe it's because Indians are the most rural ethnic population on the continent. Of course, in West Virginia we have districts that are regarded as **huge** north of the Ohio River and west of the Mississippi. Nobody here seems to know that, and I continue to hear reports that those whom I will politely call "policy makers" think it would be a good idea to form multi-county districts.

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But in Georgia, Ohio, and West Virginia, we did find the district size effect. Districts serving large populations of poor kids apparently do damage to the overall achievement levels in those districts. The same kids in smaller schools within smaller districts would be expected to do a lot better on the basis of our findings, *all else equal*.

I add "all else equal" because all else can never be equal. The world is in flux, and the usual problem with such studies as ours is that it's difficult to control for changes in time and circumstance.

Ha! That's why this particular series of studies is interesting. We've got dramatically different states, with different forms of school and district organization, in different parts of the country, serving a different ethnic mix from one another, and, in fact, studied in 1988 (California), 1993 (Alaska), 1996 (West Virginia), and 1999 (Georgia, Montana, Ohio, and Texas). The studies cover at least a decade of data in really very different places.

Now I've got to interpret this mess for you.

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That will be pretty simple. I'm talking about distributive justice, getting resources to those most in need. I know, I know, this is very un-American; we like to give the most and best

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resources to those least in need. That's what makes the idea of building small schools in poor communities difficult. The first step is to keep them open where they already exist--it's much less expensive because the standards for school construction keep getting more and more expensive. Our policies have arranged to make replacement schools more expensive.

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Why should we spend this money? I'll give you a real practical reason. You know those bad test scores? Where do you think you'll get the most help raising them? Hmm? That's right, poor kids, kids whose performance is challenged more often by the ugly threats that our tradition imposes on them; that is, the tradition of giving the most resources to the people who need them least.

13 to 1: remember that ratio? It's the name of the game.

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OK. That's two points out of my five iffy points, the second being the main point, and I spent a lot of time on it.

Points three and four concern accessibility of parents and plenty of adults. The lack of adults in kids' lives is concurrent with the demise of rural life.

Ah.

Why is that? It used to be that farming was a family enterprise, not just in the sense that it was something that every member of the family participated in, but it was something that many, many families did. It was a family thing to do.

What's the contemporary family thing to do? Watch television. Go shopping, maybe. Think there's a difference? Sure--consumption replaces production, the production of things and

the production of meanings. Families and whole communities stop making their own meanings, and the commercial world supplies the meanings instead. No thought, no effort, no care required. Shopping and television are also how we become educated today. Schooling too often steps right in line. Actually, I mean "miseducated."

Here are some more handy national statistics for you. In 1880--not so long after my grandparents were born--the US was about 75% rural, and about 42% of the population lived on farms; in 1920, it was 50% and about 30%; in 1960, 30% and 10%. Today, only a small minority of rural people operate profitable farms. Sure, I know, many of us farm some, but our energies and imaginations are sucked up by other enterprises and other meanings, from which--this is the point--our children are vigorously excluded. Most of our children--and I mean the children of those in this room this afternoon--are clueless about what we do and how we personally do it, even though everyone of our kids, like us, is an expert on schooling.

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We could slowly change this if we cared enough to do it. We know it's a problem. What gets in the way? How we do business, economic business, and the game called 13 to 1.

I have another reading suggestion for you: Juliet Shor, *The Overworked American*. She says we pile up capital in enterprises that have little to do with caring for children or community. We drive ourselves silly and frantic, withdrawing time and attention from families and communities--and, to be sure, from thinking about difficult questions and dilemmas.

This, by the way, is just as true of me as of any of you. Maybe more true.

I'm a sinner and I told Linda Martin I was too busy to serve on the West Virginia Challenge group of advisors. I'm too busy, it's true.

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So much for the absence of parents, point three in the sort of better world in which all children might learn to high levels. Point four is even easier: so few adults.

Schools are the most efficient babysitters yet devised by man or woman; mostly by man, I'd say, from the looks of it. No mom in her right mind would volunteer to babysit 25 kids. Right?

I don't **personally know** anyone with 25 kids. I know two people who had 12, and I've **met** someone from a family of 13.

In each case, some of those kids *died*. If you're facing 25 kids in a classroom, you got 25 *live ones*.

Yeah, get it: we think we've accomplished a freaking miracle to *reduce* class sizes to 25. This is the most adult attention many of these kids get. No adults, hardly, in kids' lives.

Suicide and murder seem to me, however, to corroborate our claim that the world is more dangerous, and that children need more, rather than *much less*, care and attention than used to be the case. Need I point out that small schools and districts put more adults into kids' lives? Just realize that I'm not saying we need to go back to the miserable 19th century. We need to go onward to a better world.

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Care and attention brings me to the anti-intellctualism we too often practice under the name of schooling. Whoops. Hang on. This is the fifth iffy point.

Don't get me wrong. Kids manage to learn a lot of things in school. Our literacy rate in the US is virtually 100 percent, and don't forget it.

It's nonetheless said that we are not a "functionally literate" people. That was Ravitch and Finn's point a few years back. They'll be saying it again on a TV screen near you.

The masses are ignorant! The masses are ignorant!

Oh? Perhaps we should restrict the right to vote to property owners? On the test of life, property owners have proven ***they're*** "functionally literate." Well, maybe not literate, but certainly functional. With some exceptions. Well, a lot of exceptions, which are most conveniently ignored.

No, "functional literacy" is a terrifying phrase. What it suggests is that there is a certain level of literacy that works.

It's a very Marxist notion, really. You learn the alphabet, learn to write your name, pass successfully through a few levels of basal reader or whatever, and, at some point, these little quantitative changes in knowledge--presto! change-o!--render you "functional." That's how some communists thought the transition to socialism would work. Didn't turn out that way. In the end, they were stuck with state capitalism.

Personally, I would feel much happier about the functionality of someone who could and did read the Bible. And I'm a leftist pinko liberal commie atheist.

Frankly, I can't read directions real well; I lose patience. I love maps, but I spend too much time looking at them, conjuring unknown landscapes and cultures. I'm not a very *efficient* map-user. My personal record with finances is so poor that I'm **not allowed** to carry a checkbook.

All of this suggests a state of seriously compromised functionality. In fact, my project in life has been to subvert functionality to the extent economically feasible. I'm pleased to report a

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measu e of success.

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We're coming into the home stretch, now folks.

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The idea of what will function, what will "work,"-- as Bill Bennett, Checker Finn, Diane Ravitch, those curvy bell guys, and *in fact* many friendly Democrats, all of them together say--is dramatically anti-intellectual. I'm telling you not to do what is claimed to work. At least, please regard such claims with deep skepticism.

The findings about school and district size are a case in point. Cronbach's aptitude treatment interaction is another. And so is the idea of multiple influence generally. These are chaotic processes, people. Chaos isn't bad, it just means that there other patterns at work than those the profession usually tells us about. It can hardly admit they exist; it doesn't understand them. It has constructed a hundred years of very, very different knowledge.

It's hard work to see through the false claims. We aren't motivated to see through them. We're exhorted to believe them. We seem, ourselves, because of the painful work we do, to want a prescription that will dull our pain. We want instant gratification. Tell us what works, O Lord! Surely something must! Actually, most of us express a large measure of private skepticism. Publicly, though, we fall in line. I know I have and probably will again.

So, you ask, what *does* work?

Why is he telling us we're "anti-intellectual"?

First, let me say it again, nothing *works*. We're talking, folks, about the *intellect*, that's why.

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What Aimee and Eddy Pendarvis and I wrote about in our book on anti-intellectualism was **not** unfair prejudice against intellectuals. We weren't having a pity-party for intellectuals. Intellectuals are among the chief enemies of intellect. The conservative cultural critic Jacques Barzun says so, and he should know. He's spent his entire working life in one of the really big cosmopolitan centers of Enlightened knowledge.

Intellect, by the way, is not the property of individuals. Intellect builds up between minds and in society over time. It's cultural. It rises, and, like empires, alas it falls.

Well, we contend that the whole skills-based, lower-literacy, what-works- to-produce-X-with-schooling-sort-of-mindset is a kind of one-best system for beating intellect into the ground. It's motto is better, faster, cheaper. It really works, from what we can see.

Some of you may recognize "better, faster, cheaper" as Lew Perlman's slogan. Lew was making the rounds a while back, helping to get us ready for the 21st century. Anyhow, Perlman's revolu ionary slogan turns out to be straight from the desk of a television producer. The producer had a sign in his office that read: "Good. Fast. Cheap. Choose any two." That simple rule is like the ones that govern chaos. We need a different rule, but we need to understand the existing rule.

Critical questions are "What kind of good can be got cheap?" "What kind of good can be got fast?" and "What can we get fast and cheap?" The answer to all three questions is the same: functional literacy.

You can't build intellect by aiming at functional literacy, because the yardstick of what works is efficiency. Intellect, on the other hand, positively requires care and attention; it requires downtime as well as time-on-task, folks! It thrives on the disposition to share knowledge and

insight, and on the shared struggle to understand. It thrives on debate, contradiction, critique, confusion, even chaos. Most of all it takes time, and time is money.

Do you think that this sort of thing happens mostly in elite private schools and not mostly in pub ic schools because our kids are too dumb? That's what the functional literacy people want you to believe! You see, what works takes us right back to blaming the victim, or to put it another way, to low-low expectations.

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The technology of nudging test scores around--you know, practice, special treats, and worse stuff--and getting kids excited about reading instruction manuals won't do us any good at all. We waste our time and the kids' minds--and our collective minds--in paying much attention to most of what we're told to pay attention to.

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I'd like to close with a few words about progress, because progress is the foundation of why cosmopolites call rural folks dumber than a fence post and it's also the foundation of school improvement. Interesting dilemma; or is it an interesting consistency?

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"Can't stop progress," you think?

C'mon, I know some of you are thinking it. Maybe none of us can stop it, but--funny thing--it's stopped of its own accord, O Brothers and Sisters. I'm not kidding, no one who counts believes in progress any more.

I'm serious. Check it out. Christopher Lasch didn't believe in it. Wendell Berry sure doesn't. There are dozens of historians, sociologists, and scientists who basically agree. Go to

the library and check it out.

The world's a mess after just two measly centuries of what so far has passed for "progress"--accelerating technological change, dizzy social change. Do you really imagine that the nuclear threat is gone just because the Soviet Union folded up shop? That stuff's still out there; that stuff will *always* be still out there. There's lots more, and you've heard it all before. It's sobering to realize where we have landed with the kind of progress that experts design. We need the kind of progress, I think, that generalists design.

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Although it seems that we can do without the progress of experts, we'll need teachers and other folks who trade in ignorance for a long, long time to come. Maybe a full millennium. If we're lucky.

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Thanks for your patience and attention.

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